DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 808 CS 508 320

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TITLE Generation X and Objectionable Advertising: A Q-Sort of Senior Advertising Students' Attitudes toward Objectionable Advertising.
PUB DATE Aug 93
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (76th, Kansas City, MO, August 11-14, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising; Audience Awareness; College Seniors; Higher Education; Mass Media Effects; Media Research; Periodicals; Q Methodology; *Sexuality; *Student Attitudes; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Advertising Effectiveness; Generation X

ABSTRACT

A study investigated what a group of 29 senior advertising students, part of "Generation X," at a midwestern university found "objectionable" in 35 selected contemporary magazine advertising executions. Using a Q-sort, students ranked the advertisements and completed a personal interview. The majority of the advertisements that students found "objectionable" featured nudity and explicit sexual suggestiveness. The Q-study concurs with related research in the field. It supports the finding that the use of nudity and sexual suggestiveness in advertising involves risk for the advertiser. Most, if not all, of the advertisements were targeted toward Generation X. Yet, members of this group found the advertisements to be objectionable, which raises the point: how much, or how little, is known about this consumer segment. (Two tables of data and 21 notes are included; an appendix presenting descriptions of and data related to each of the 35 advertisements is attached.) (RS)

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ED 361 808

GENERATION X AND OBJECTIONABLE ADVERTISING
A Q-sort of senior advertising students' attitudes toward objectionable advertising.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates what a group of senior advertising students, part of Generation X, at a midwestern university found "objectionable" in 35 selected contemporary advertising executions. Using a Q-sort, students had to rank these advertisements and then complete a personal interview. The majority of the advertisements featured nudity and explicit sexual suggestiveness. Most, if not all, of the advertisements were targeted toward Generation X. Yet, members of this group found these objectionable, which raises the point: how much, or how little, is known about this consumer segment.

INTRODUCTION

Who are the people who make up Generation X? Karen Ritchie, McCann-Erickson, Worldwide, warned the media in 1992 that the baby boomers were getting old and if the media did not recognize the emergence of the "busters," they "risked alienating a group ready to overtake boomers as the primary market for nearly every product category."[1]

Generation X may be a smaller group (46 million) than the boomers, but "their annual spending power is already estimated at $125 billion. More than half are still living with their parents, leaving them with more disposable income and less entrenched brand loyalties."[2]

Many media are trying to straddle both worlds by relying on demographics such as the 18 - 34 age group which encompasses both boomers and Generation X. There are, however, signs that some media are leaning toward the younger generation as the boomers are getting older. "Beverly Hills, 90210," "Melrose Place," "The Heights," "Class of '96," and "The Round Table" are examples of how some of the media are now wooing this segment.

While little is known about this group, a stereotypical portrait of Generation X is emerging: media savvy, but they feel alienated from the mainstream culture that has ignored them. "They resent the boomers for a variety of real and perceived evils, from hogging the best jobs to spoiling the environment. The problem with this particular generation is that they've gotten the short end of the stick for a long time so they're understandably a little hostile. They're not sharing in the American dream. They're in back of this enormous generation so they're by definition going to get hand-me-downs."[3]

Mitchell Fox, publisher of Conde Nast Publications' *Details*, has a skeptical outlook on what the media community's response to discovering this valuable consumer market will be. "I fear publishers and broadcasters will create media

that are marketing-driven to capture advertising dollars rather than those that are reader- or viewer-driven." Interestingly, Scott Donaton,[4] claims that those who have studied Generation X believe that a low-key approach works best to reach them and he continues to cite successful youth-oriented campaigns from such marketers as Revlon, Calvin Klein Inc., The Gap and Burger King Corp.

One of the investigators for this study had his introductory-level class of 63 students submit advertisements which they found "objectionable." He was amazed to discover that most, if not all of these advertisements, were in fact aimed at them – Generation X. It was decided to test these advertisements among a segment of this generation – senior students enrolled in a capstone advertising course – to determine whether they viewed them in the same light and why. Prior to the study, the authors compiled a list of what they anticipated as possible issues that might be classified as objectionable advertising:

1 Exaggerated claims (puffery and unfair comparisons)

2 Stereotypes inappropriately portraying women and minorities

3 "Unpopular" products (cigarettes, alcohol, birth control, etc)

4 Political, religious and social messages

5 Sexual explicitness, suggestiveness and nudity

Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of advertisements submitted by students fell into category 5 – ads which featured sexual explicitness, suggestiveness and nudity.

This study looks at what a group of senior advertising students, members of the Generation X population, considered to be objectionable advertising and to what extent they found the selected advertisements objectionable and why.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The purpose of brand advertising is to sell, but in order for an advertisement to sell, it first has to be noticed. It would appear that many advertisers will go to any lengths to have their advertising noticed. In the search for the most effective way to advertise, more and more advertisers are reaching into an area which could be classified as "shock" advertising.

In 1980 Calvin Klein caused an outcry with his two jeans commercials, *The Feminist* (featuring Brooke Shields where "nothing comes between me and my Calvins") and *The Teenager* ("If my jeans could talk, I'd be ruined"). These commercials were banned by some television stations, a decision forced by "viewers decrying the commercials."[5] Not perturbed, Mr. Klein said that "jeans are about sssexx"[6] and would continue along these lines to sell his products in the years to come. In hindsight, one can say that these Calvin Klein commercials are tame compared to what the public is subjected today. Visuals have indeed become so explicit that they border on pornography. This concurs with Soley and Kurzbard's[7] findings that sexual illustrations have become much more overt over a 20-year period.

Barnes and Dotson[8] reported that a person's perception of "offensiveness" in television commercials is a function of the product itself and the execution of the commercial. They pointed out that while consumers may understand that it may be more difficult to make advertisements non-offensive for some types of products, they might not agree with the advertiser's solution.

Nudity in advertising is nothing new. Visuals depicting partial or total nudity have been employed for a long time to gain product and brand attention, recall and sales. Steadman[9] undertook a study to determine how sexy illustrations affected brand recall. Alexander and Judd[10] replicated this study and concluded that nudity in advertising did not enhance brand recall; in fact,

they found that advertisements with forests and mountains received higher recall scores. This concurs with Steadman's[11] research which concluded that nonsexual illustrations were more effective than sexual ones in achieving brand recall. Attitudes toward nudity in advertising have been found to vary by different groups of people. Alexander and Judd[12] further found:

- more negative attitudes were evident among females in general and females from small towns who read more magazines and watch more television
- younger males and males who attend church frequently held more negative attitudes

Soley and Kurzbard[13] discovered that:

- although the percentage of ads with sexual content remained constant, the absolute number of ads has increased in the average issue of the studied magazines during the twenty-year time interval
- general-interest magazines have shown a marked increase in sexually oriented ads but women's and men's magazines have not
- sexual illustrations have become more overt
- sexual elements, when present, tend to be more likely visual than verbal – this is a tendency which has increased over time
- female models are more likely to be portrayed as suggestively clad, partially clad, or nude than male models

Judd and Alexander[14] stated that sexual appeals in advertisements may be unbelievable and destroy the logical unity of the advertisement. Judd and Alexander[15] reported that the use of indiscriminate sexual themes can sometimes reduce a product's appeal, depending on the product's appropriateness or match with the suggested themes. Richmond and Hartman[16] found that a judicious use of sex appeal can produce satisfactory results. "Functional," "fantasy" and "symbolic" use of sexual appeal may have a legitimate and non-offensive role for

some products. Now, it may be accepted in some advertising circles that "sex sells," but where does one draw the line?

Severn, et. al.,[17] examined the communication effectiveness of visually explicit sexual stimuli and reported that:

- given the nature of a very explicit sexual portrayal, it would seem that more attention would be given to the ad execution than to the message content ... thus drawing cognitive processing away from the evaluation of the product and/or the message
- the ability to recall a brand name appeared to be more a function of the information level of the ad than of its sexual explicitness

From the research review, it seems advertisers should use caution in selecting sexual themes for their brands' advertising campaigns. There appears to be limitations to their appropriateness and effectiveness; so, there are risks.

Based on the available research and the authors' sentiments toward the implications of identifying and understanding students' opinions of objectionable advertising, the following research questions were posed:

- Which contemporary advertising executions do students find to be the most objectionable?
- What kinds of executions or products are selected most often?

METHOD

The 29 senior students, drawn from the capstone course, *Advertising Campaigns,* were comprised of 17 males and 12 females whose grade point averages ranged from 2.2 - 3.7. Their ages ranged from 21 to 26 years. Twenty-three of the respondents were from Indiana while 14 were affiliated with the Republican party compared to the five Democrats (10 indicated no political preference). Fourteen students claimed to be Catholic while the others' denominations varied; three showed no particular preference.

Each of the subjects was given a set of 35 print advertisements from various magazines, and asked to rank each of them by means of a Q-sort on a 9-point scale from "most objectionable" to "least objectionable." The Q-sort was immediately followed by a personal interview to better understand the respondents' reasoning behind their rankings.

Q-sort is a behavioral research technique which was introduced by William Stephenson.[18] This technique allows the investigator systematically to study subjectivity. While each Q-sort reflects each subject's own point-of-view regarding objectionable advertising, Q-sort rankings are subsequently subjected to factor analysis which provides clusters of perceptions toward the subject. Because investigators are interested in the clusters or patterns of perceptions which arise from the sorts, their focus is on the qualitative aspects of the perspectives rather than the quantitative. In this study, investigators were concerned with the typical patterns of perceptions found among senior advertising students rather than with what might be considered the average advertising student's opinion concerning the test advertisements.

Responses were computer tabulated at Ball State University using the QMETHOD factor analysis program.[19] One of the benefits of the QMETHOD program is its flexibility which allows investigators, if they wish, to compare and contrast hand rotated factors with computer generated factors. In order to determine if factors should be retained in the solution, at least two of the factor loadings on each factor must be significant at the .01 level. Factor loadings in this study were considered significant if they exceeded .479. This significant correlation was determined by a procedure using the standard error of a zero-order loading, which is explained in Brown.[20]

QMETHOD also provided a descending array of statements and normalized z-scores on both factors for all 35 advertisements. Scores above and

below a z-score criterion of 1.0 for each factor were considered signficant (see Appendix A for a two-factor summary of z-scores for all 35 advertisements.)

Because a strong correlation was found between the two factors generated for this study, investigators employed another technique explained in Brown[21] which would highlight significant differences in statements between each factor array. Since QMETHOD averages the Q-Sort values provided by the subjects for each statement initially, those statements which varied between each factor array of statements by a score of three or more were also used to distinguish one factor from the other.

Once each of the factors was determined, the investigators inspected the demographics for the subjects who comprised each factor type to determine if demographic charactertistics could provide more information about persons loading on each factor.

FINDINGS

After the Q sorts had been tabulated and submitted for analysis, two factors emerged from the sorts of the 29 senior advertising students. For the first factor (Factor I), 15 subjects sorted the advertisements in similar manner. On the second factor (Factor II), 14 subjects sorted in similar fashion. The correlation between the two factors was .542 and the both factors accounted for 34.5 percent percent of the total variance in the correlation matrix.

As a method of identifying these two factors, arbitrary labels were created by the authors which seemed appropriate for each factor based on the demographics which were associated with each factor. Factor I subjects were labeled "Chauvinists," while Factor II subjects were labeled "Feminists."

FACTOR I (Chauvinists). Respondents on this factor objected most to advertisements featuring sexual explicitness and social issues. These executions

were part of two advertising campaigns carried in the sort ranked by students: Wilke Rodriguez (sexual explicitness) and Benetton (social issues). Twelve males and three females provided the highest factor loadings on this factor.

Ads considered "most objectionable" by this group displayed men and women in sexually compromising positions and graphically displayed scenes of death. One of the ads carried a lone picture of an electric chair, and the other carried a death bed scene with the victim resembling the Christ figure (see Table 1). Each of these Benetton ads received significantly higher factor value scores on this factor than on Factor II. The Benetton death bed ad was rated a +4 by Factor I respondents, while Factor II respondents ranked it, -1. The Benetton electric chair ad was rated +3 by Factor I respondents, and -2 by Factor II respondents. Some of the students' comments as to why they objected to the above ads, are noted below:

- **"The Benetton ads are sacrilegious, disgusting, morbid"**
- **"Far too sexually explicit"**
- **"The Wilke Rodriguez ads are obscene and pornographic"**
- **"I wouldn't want my kids to see these"**
- **"They're just doing it for shock value"**

TABLE 1: Factor I Objectionable Ads with Significant Z-scores

No.	Advertisement	Z-scores
14	Wilke-Rodriguez--Man's face in woman's crotch, breast partly exposed	1.845
24	Benetton--Family gathered around death bed of AIDS patient resembling Christ	1.832*
19	Benetton--Two page spread with electric chair off-center	1.332*
16	Wilke-Rodriguez--Couple on roof top simulating intercourse	1.216
21	Wilke-Rodriguez--Couple on roof top in heavy necking situation intertwined	1.175
32	Trojan condoms--Male model on sail board	-1.345
33	Integrated Conditioning--Bodybuilder holding woman from behind	-1.412
28	Camel Lights--Joe Camel in tux offering cigarettes	-2.069
29	Kool Cigarettes--Model in jump suit standing with legs apart	-2.191

*Advertisements significantly different after comparing factor value scores

Factor I respondents found the following advertisements least objectionable: Trojan condoms, Integrated Conditioning Programs (featuring a well-built male bodybuilder) and two cigarette ads, Camel and Kool. These ads did not deal with specific issues, but featured somewhat controversial products. Below are some of their comments for ranking these ads the way they did.

- **"Smoking is not offensive"**
- **"There's nothing objectionable about cigarette advertising"**
- **"Condoms have become a part of life, need to promote it"**
- **"Cigarette advertising is OK if it's directed at adults"**

FACTOR II (Feminists). Fourteen students were associated with this factor including nine females. These respondents objected most to those advertisements degrading women and featuring sexual explicitness and gay women (see Table 2). These advertisements include Wilke Rodriguez (sexual explicitness), Cafe Tabac (lesbianism) and Adam's Boots (degrading women).

The two ads degrading to women were particularly bothersome to students who comprised this factor. The boot ad with the woman in a tank top licking the floor was rated a +3 by Factor II respondents, but a -1 by Factor I respondents. The second boot ad with a woman in a T-shirt was rated +2 by Factor II respondents, and a -1 again by Factor I. Students offered the following comments about their rankings:

- **"Too sexually explicit, selling sex and could not tell the product"**
- **"Wilke Rodriguez ads are obscene"**
- **"There must be a better way to advertise than showing two lesbians"**
- **"Portray women as sex objects"**
- **"Exploitation of women"**

Only one advertisement rated least objectionable by Factor II was significantly different from Factor I respondents. Factor II respondents did not think that a burning car on a European street was offensive (-3), but Factor I

respondents rated the same ad +1.

TABLE 2: Factor II Objectionable Ads with Significant Z-scores

No.	Advertisement	Z-scores
14	Wilke-Rodriguez--Man's face in woman's crotch, breast partly exposed	2.341
21	Wilke-Rodriguez--Couple on roof top intertwined, heavy necking situation	1.726
31	Cafe Tabac--Closeup of two women kissing passionately	1.558
16	Wilke-Rodriguez--Couple on roof top simulating intercourse	1.216
17	Adam's Boots--Woman in tank top on knees licking shiny floor	1.147*
18	Adam's Boots--Woman in T-shirt on knees licking floor	1.076*
3	Calvin Klein--Woman on top of man on beach in bathing suits	-1.039
29	Kool Cigarettes--Model in jump suit standing with legs apart	-1.223
26	Benetton--Burning car on street, double truck	-1.227*
23	Gap--Black female model wearing shorts with hands in crotch	-1.317
34	Gyne-Moistrin--Classic painting of nude with back to painter	-1.594
28	Camel Lights--Joe Camel in tux offering cigarettes	-1.668
32	Trojan Condoms--Male model on sail board	-1.937

*Advertisements significantly different after comparing factor value scores

Ads which Factor II respondents objected to least included: Trojan condoms, Camel and Kool cigarettes, Calvin Klein cologne, Gap, Benetton and Gyne-moistrin. These advertisements did not feature nudity or sexual explicitness, although two of them portrayed mild sexual suggestiveness and the students stated why they did not object to these:

- **"It's good to show and sell condoms"**
- **"The cigarette advertising doesn't imply anything or try and shock"**
- **"Cigarette advertising is OK as they carry warnings"**

In summary, while respondents on both factors found the same three advertisements (Wilke-Rodriquez jeans) to be most objectionable, the predominantly male factor rejected two other ads which graphically represented death. The predominantly female factor rejected ads that degraded women, whether alone or together, in a suggestive scene.

CONCLUSION

For years, advertisers have used nudity and sexual appeals to attract attention in an effort to build brand recall and sales. It seems that the use of nudity and sexual appeals is continuing to increase and grow more sexually explicit (Soley & Kurzbard).

Previous research indicates that using nudity and sexual appeals involves risk for advertisers. A number of studies concluded that nonsexual illustrations are more effective than sexual ones in achieving brand recall (Steadman; Alexander & Judd). People may remember the "sexy" advertising execution, but not the product (Severn). In addition, nudity and sexual situations in advertising may create negative attitudes toward the brand, especially if their use seems inappropriate (Peterson & Herin).

The authors' Q-study of 35 magazine advertisements found objectionable by senior advertising students, concurs with related research in this field. It supports the finding that the use of nudity and sexual suggestiveness in advertising, indeed, involves risk for the advertiser.

When students were asked to submit examples of advertising they found "objectionable," the overwhelming majority of ads submitted featured nudity and sexual suggestiveness and explicitness.

According to the Q-sort findings, students (both Factors I, "Chauvinists," and II, "Feminists") ranked the most sexually explicit advertising examples (Wilke Rodriguez) as the most objectionable. Secondly, the Chauvinists most objected to advertising which featured social issues and death scenes (Benetton ads). Feminists, on the other hand, next objected most to advertising which they believed degraded women (Cafe Tabac and Adam's Boots).

In personal interviews respondents explained their Q-sorts. They stated that there are limits to tastefulness and questioned how much sexual explicitness

should be tolerated in advertising. They particularly objected to the indiscriminate use of sexual appeals; that is, sexual situations that had little or nothing to do with the product being advertised. Respondents also explained that they believed Benetton's use of social issues in its advertising was simply a means of attracting attention which they felt was inappropriate and objectionable.

Respondents objected less to advertising which tastefully presented nude models or sexual suggestiveness that were clearly related to the brand being advertised (e.g. Obsession).

While respondents in this study ranked the cigarette and condom advertising examples as least objectionable, the authors believe that if the sample of advertisements was changed to include less controversial executions, those products' advertising would probably be considered more objectionable. This is certainly an area for further study.

NOTES

[1-4] Advertising Age."The media wakes up to Generation X." February 1, 1993, pp. 16 - 17.

[5] Advertising Age. "Protest comes between media and their Calvins." November 24, 1980, 51 p. 65.

[6] Time magazine. "What's it all about, Calvin?" September 23, 1991, 138 (12) p. 44.

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[15] Ibid.

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[18] Stephenson, W. (1953). The Study of Behavior. Chicago : University of Chicago Press.

[19] QMETHOD was written by John R. Atkinson, director of Academic Computer Services, Kent State University. Kent, Ohio. The program is available for CMS or VAX installations, and can be obtained on disk or by e-mail.

[20] Brown, S. R., (1980). Political subjectivity : Applications of Q-methodology in political science. New Haven : Yale University Press. (p. 222).

[21] Ibid., p. 246.

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"Nothing comes between jeans and sex in Calvin Klein spots." September 24, 1990, 61 (39) p. 60.

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The New York Times. "Has Madison Avenue gone too far?" December 15, 1991. Section 6, p. 5.

Time Magazine. "Benetton ads: a risque business." March 25, 1991, 137 (12) p.13

APPENDIX A

Ad descriptions, typal Z-scores and differences for two factors

	Item descriptions		Type 1	Type 2	Diff.
		Ns for each type are:	15	14	
1	Yes Clothing Co	Man, hand underneath woman's exposed breast putting cherry in her mouth	-0.878	-0.037	-0.841
2	Whooz Blooz Jeans	Two high school kids in front of wall, his hand on her rear	-0.708	0.082	-0.790
3	Calvin Klein (Escape)	Couple in bathing costumes on top of each other on beach, necking	-0.983	-1.039	0.056
4	Calvin Klein (Obsession)	Naked male torso	0.052	-0.490	0.542
5	Do	Naked woman draped over naked man's shoulder	0.690	0.141	0.549
6	Do	Naked man and woman on swing	0.928	0.333	0.595
7	Calvin Klein (underwear)	Marky Mark grabbing crotch	0.756	0.518	0.238
8	Do	Marky Mark and woman model, naked torsos	-0.009	0.512	-0.521
9	Calvin Klein Jeans	Faceless bodies, female removing belt from male's undone jeans	-0.191	0.384	-0.576
10	Do	Double page. LHS topless model, breast exposed; RHS model, shirt on	0.110	0.675	-0.565
11	Guess Jeans	Close up of well-endowed woman whose cleavage is showing	-0.685	0.048	-0.733
12	Do	Do	-0.357	0.309	-0.667
13	Request Jeans	Woman sitting on bed undressing, jeans half way off	0.067	0.472	-0.405
14	Wilke-Rodriguez	Man with face in woman's crotch, breast partly exposed	1.845	2.341	0.496
15	Request Jeans	Couple necking on bed	0.267	0.287	-0.020
16	Wilke-Rodriguez	Couple on roof top simulating intercourse	1.216	1.283	-0.067

17	Adam's Boots	Woman licking shiny floor, breast more exposed than in #18	-0.367	1.147	-1.514
18	Adam's Boots	Woman licking shiny floor	-0.493	1.076	-1.569
19	Benetton	Electric chair	1.332	-0.638	1.970
20	Request Jeans	Model on fence, legs spread, breasts partly exposed	-0.851	-0.478	-0.373
21	Wilke-Rodriguez	Couple on roof top in heavy necking situation	1.175	1.726	-0.551
22	Request Jeans	Man who has just finished urinating	0.319	-0.835	1.154
23	Gap	Female model grabbing crotch	-0.999	1.317	0.318
24	Benetton	Family gathered around death bed of AIDS patient resembling Christ figure	1.832	-0.513	2.345
25	Do	Albino in foreground against African tribe in background	0.824	0.064	0.760
26	Do	Burning car	0.635	-1.227	1.862
27	Cafe Luxembourg	Naked, overweight women photograhed from behind	0.479	0.461	0.017
28	Camel Lights	Joe Camel	-2.069	-1.668	-0.401
29	Kool Cigarettes	Clothed model, standing with legs apart	-2.191	-1.223	-0.968
30	Banana Republic	Two men with hands around each other's neck and chest	0.704	0.067	0.637
31	Cafe Tabac	Two women kissing passionately	0.772	1.558	-0.786
32	Trojan Condoms	Male model surfing	-1.345	-1.937	0.591
33	Integrated Conditioning Programs	Muscular man holding well- built woman	-1.412	0.110	-1.523
34	Gyne-Moistrin	Classic painting of nude model painted from behind	-0.496	-1.594	1.098
35	K-Y Jelly	Silhouette of naked woman	0.034	-0.599	0.633